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Sammy Baloji
Filip De Boeck
University of Leuven

The Tower. A Concrete Utopia

Traditionally, urban planning and architecture carry a form of utopian optimism for a livable city with them. Yet, all too often infrastructural dreams turn into nightmares and the skyward ideals of a towered cityscape turns into the symbolism of degraded holes. In a narrative that takes off from an architectural apprentice and the cast-in-concrete spirits that he called, photographer Sammy Baloji and anthropologist Filip de Boeck weave photos and text into a construction of hopes, failures, and social complexities nested into the material existence of postcolonial Kinshasa.

Sammy Baloji
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The Tower

The Tower stands in the middle of the industrial zone of Limete, one of the municipalities of the city of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Part-skyscraper, part-pyramid, part-citadel, this unfinished and ragged twelve-story building stands, incongrously, among the warehouses, industrial plants, railroad tracks, and new houses under construction that constitute the built environment of Limete industriel. Towering above this desultory landscape, defying gravitational laws and urban zoning rules this uncommon architectural proposition forms one of the strangest and most enigmatic landmarks of the city. A giant question mark, it begs for profound reflection on the nature of the city, the heritage of its colonial modernist architecture, the dystopic nature of its infrastructure, and the capacity for utopian urban dreams and lines of flight that it nonetheless continues to generate.

The proud owner and (together with his wife) the sole inhabitant of the Tower, is a middle-aged man, a medical doctor who specializes in "aeronautic and spatial medicine." In 2003, the "*Docteur*" (as everybody calls him) bought a small plot of 13 square meters. Assisted by two architects, he set out to build a four-story building, but well before reaching that level, the doctor fired the architects and from there, without a clear plan, he became his own architect (and this is the norm rather than the exception in Kinshasa). Somewhere along the line, however, the

doctor got carried away by his love for and preoccupation with the skies, and soon that which had started as a modest and more regular housing construction evolved into an increasingly megalomaniacal vertical proposition, reaching ever higher into the sky, and eating up ever more cement and concrete. Sacrificing his own finances, health, and peace of mind to realize his "vision," the doctor thus gradually lost control of the building site. The Tower took over and started to impose its own unstoppable logic, building itself to its logical conclusion, while the doctor became the Tower's hostage, its visionary martyr. The tower itself, so the doctor hopes, will be completed by "posterity" (for he is very aware that he will probably be unable to complete the Tower in his own lifetime).

I would argue that the Tower may be understood as an idiosyncratic but also programmatic, and even messianic, statement on the nature of a more ideal and livable future city. First, the doctor stresses the functionality of the building, even though that functional level obviously leaves much to be desired from an infrastructural point of view. There is no running water or electricity inside the building, for example, and the plumbing for the many bathrooms and toilets, which are planned for every floor, has been forgotten or omitted. But beyond the level of its material infrastructure, the doctor envisages the as-yet-unfinished building as a city in itself, a humanistic project that transcends the city, while simultaneously recreating it within its own confines, incorporating all kinds of people and activities. The Tower sets the scene for a new vertical and autarkic urban community. A number of medical cabinets, already installed on the first- and second floors, have turned the base of the building into a hospital and a site for the healing of bodily harms. Other floors are designed to become lawyer's offices (on the third floor), a restaurant for all the future inhabitants of the Tower (sixth floor), and even an entire aviation school (fourth floor). Scattered throughout the labyrinthine building there will be rooms designated for use by visiting philosophers, poets, inventors, and scientists. Finally, high above the ground, on the building's windy top-floor, in the company of birds and close to God, is the place for healing the soul. The building's spire invites prayer, but also contemplation of the beauty of the natural world—of the Congo River and of Kinshasa's many hills. Looking out over the city set out like a stage below is the perfect setting to reflect upon human nature itself, with all of its virtues and vices, its possibilities and shortcomings.

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image caption

Sammy Baloji 2016

Thus, the healing of body and soul, situated at the bottom and the top of the Tower, respectively, bracket the whole idea of the structure itself. Between ground floor and spire, the Tower offers a continuum between corporeal and mental matter. Architecturally, these two levels are connected by means of what the doctor refers to as an "ergonomic" flight of stairs, dangerously spiraling upward. The main function of the Tower is, thus, to turn the urban residents into better, more fully integrated human subjects. According to the doctor's vision, therefore, the Tower will also function as a tourist destination, a place to visit, to retreat to, where people will be able to recover themselves before plunging back into the chaos of the surrounding city.

The Tower does many other things besides; in the doctor's own words, his tower is an attempt to "illuminate the hole," to transcend the bare life, the mere level of survival that the city imposes upon its inhabitants, and to turn it into something else. It is, for example, a perfect structure for the visual observation *and* control of life played out at ground level. The Tower is also a watchtower. It is a perfect vantage point to observe suspect movements and warn of imminent terrorist attacks in the city. Besides, thanks to an intricate antennae system that has not yet been installed, the

Tower – in its maker's mind at least – will also operate as an air-traffic control tower: if for some reason the infrastructure of Kinshasa's international airport should fail, airplanes will be able to use the Tower as a beacon to make a safe landing. The Tower is also a solid safe haven, a Noah's ark for Kinshasa's inhabitants in case of a flood, for example, or the more unlikely event of a tsunami.The prospect of flood, tsunami, or some other devastating disaster is perhaps much less far-fetched if like most Kinois you believe in the possibility of an apocalyptic end to time.

The prospect of flood, tsunami, or close save

In fact, the Tower functions as an overall protective device against all forces of nature. In this way, it also "splits" the winds and storms during the rainy season and protects neighboring homes. The fresh breeze that constantly blows through the Tower's many rooms also makes it a welcome retreat from the city's heat. In the maker's mind, therefore, the Tower proposes a strong ecological and sustainable alternative when compared to most of the other commercial and domestic buildings of the city. It engineers a greener way of life in the polluted environment of Kinshasa; ideally, the building will be powered by solar energy (one day the doctor hopes to cover the whole outside of the Tower and parts of the roof with solar panels). The protruding cement roofs of the structure are designed to "absorb" rainwater and "breathe" it back into the city's smoggy atmosphere; parts of the rooftops themselves may be turned into gardens, where chickens and goats can graze.

In spite of the Tower's phantasmagoric character and the moralist and religious (messianic and apocalyptic) notions that underpin it, and unhindered by infrastructural obstacles and shortcomings, the doctor's discourse about his structure actually reworks many of the propositions made earlier by colonial modernist architects and urban planners. If, on a general level, the vertical *topos* of the mountain – as the physical site of domination, control, and subjugation – may be considered as colonialism's basic geographic form (after all, Stanley Spencer's first trading post was built on top of Leopold Hill – currently Mont Ngaliema), colonial modernist architecture subsequently incorporated and translated this idea of the mountain into vertical statements. These gradually emerged in the urban landscape of the 1940s and 1950s; for example, the Forescom Tower, located in what is now Kinshasa's downtown district of Gombe, became one of the early landmarks of Belgian colonial modernist urban architecture. Completed in 1946, other, ever more impressive high-rises with the tropical modernist signature followed,See Johan Lagae, Kongo zoals het is. Drie architectuurverhalen uit de Belgische kolonisatiegeschiedenis (1920-1960). Ghent: University of Ghent (doctoral dissertation), 2002.

See Johan Lagae, Kongo zoals het is. close save

but the Forescom Tower was Kinshasa's first ten-story skyscraper and virtually the first of its kind in Central Africa.See Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart, Kinshasa. Tales of the invisible city. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014, 1st ed. 2004, on p. 29 is a photo of the Forescom Tower.

See Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise close save

As such, reportedly, it was a source of pride for colonizers and colonial subjects alike. For the former, it represented the success of the colonial enterprise, while for the latter it allowed them to dream of partaking in and integrating into a more global modernity. The building was the tangible proof that Léopoldville was well underway to become the first *Poto moindo*, the first "Black Europe." The Forescom Tower pointing towards the sky signaled that it also pointed to the future; and because some of its features made it appear like a boat moored along the Congo River, it also seemed to promise to sail Léopoldville to the distant shores of other wider (and whiter) worlds beyond the horizon of the Congo River basin. The Forescom Tower, thus, gave form to new hopes, prospects, and possibilities. Materially it translated, and emblematically visualized colonialist ideologies of progress and modernity. Simultaneously, it should also be noted that the Forescom embodied the darker repressive side of colonialism, with its elaborate technologies of domination, control, and surveillance. Here as well, then, a towering building that is also a watchtower, the built extension of panoptical colonial Big Brother. As such, the figure of the tower ought also to forcefully remind us of the fact that the colonial urban landscape of Kinshasa largely came about as the result of an extremely intrusive history of (both physical and symbolic) violence and domination, marked by racial segregation, as well as by the processes of dispossession and relocation.

The Hole

How livable is the legacy of colonialist modernity in the contemporary urban setting? What remains of the colonial infrastructural heritage on a material level? What kinds of social (after)life does it still enable, and what dreams and visions of possible futures, if any, does that colonial legacy still trigger for the residents of Kinshasa today?

In postcolonial Kinshasa, many of modernity's promises and dreams have turned into a nightmare. The city, littered with colonialism's broken infrastructural dreams, with fragments and figments of a modernity that has become part of an irretrievable past, does not live up to the vertical dream. Rather than referring to the ideal of the vertical, Kinshasa's inhabitants often seem to resort to the concept of the "hole" to describe the urban infrastructure in which they live. On one level, the notion of the hole (*libulu* in Lingala, Kinshasa's *lingua franca*) refers to the physical holes and gaps that have scarred the urban surface (the many potholes in the road, or the numerous sites of erosion that characterize Kinshasa's landscape).The largest holes caused by the erosion are given names, such as the libulu Manzengele in the municipality of Ngaliema. This hole became so notorious that a Congolese nightclub owner in Bobigny, Paris, adopted the name.

The largest holes caused by the close save

But *libulu* may also refer to the dark hole of the prison, for example, or the city's shadow economy.Wenze ya libulu, the "market of the hole" is a marketplace in the municipality of Barumbu, generally its name refers to an "informal" market where goods cost below the official price. See Michel Lusamba Kibayu, Évolution des pratiques de sécurisation des conditions de vie dans trois quartiers populaires de Kinshasa: Enjeux et conséquences de la production spatiale et sociale de la ville. Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2010, p. 314.

Wenze ya libulu, the "market of the close save

Often, people use the concept of the hole to make ironic comments about the state of things in Kinshasa and in the DRC as a whole. Take the following as an example: a couple of years ago, a Kinois businessman opened a bar and dance venue next to the Forescom Tower and named it *Le Grand Libulu*, "The Big Hole." The formula proved so successful that the owner opened two more bars with the same name in the city's hinterland. In the meantime, the name Le Grand Libulu was adopted by a number of smaller bars and dancing places throughout the city, offering a typical Kinois response to the hole: if we have to live in a hole, we can as well dance in it!

But even if the hole has emerged as a kind of meta-concept to reflect the material degradation of the colonial infrastructure, all the closures, and the often dismal quality of social life that followed the material ruination of the colonial city, the following question remains: how is the gap between the colonial tower and the postcolonial hole filled in the experience of Congolese urban residents? Except dancing apart, what other possible answers has Kinshasa come up with in response to the challenge posed by the hole? If the city has transformed towers into holes, how might the holes, when "illuminated," become towers again?

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image caption

Sammy Baloji 2015

Reworking the legacies of colonialist modernity

Since independence, inhabitants of the urban landscapes of the DRC have been turning away from former colonial models, and have redefined the spaces of colonialism on their own terms. Kinshasa's residents appropriated the former colonial housing infrastructure; for example, reassembling and translating it in ways better suited to the local rhythms of social life. Using their own bodies as building blocks, Kinois have designed alternative architectures for their city. Through music and words, the residents of Kinshasa have invented new acoustic landscapes for their city, and, in doing so, they have also moved away from the colonizer's language. While there have been many moments of collective rebellion when the mirror of colonialist modernity has been violently smashed and destroyed,For example, recalling the phase of widespread looting that swept across Kinshasa and the whole country in the early 1990s. See René Devisch, "La violence à Kinshasa, ou l'institution en negatif," Cahiers d'études africaines 38, nos 2–4 (1998): pp. 441–69.

For example, recalling the phase close save

yet the inhabitants of Kinshasa somehow constantly return to, and remain hypnotized by the images reflected in the mirror of colonialist modernity. Often, it's a fascination expressed in many playful ways, which, because of their ludic and parodying nature, also manage to transcend a mere mimetic reprise of the colonial legacy and of former metropolitan models. For example, take the *sapeurs*' appropriation of Western designer clothes;Sapeurs are members of the Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes (Society of Tastemakers and Elegant People), the SAPE, a kind of post-colonial take on European dandies of colonial times.

Sapeurs are members of the Société des close save

or that the Bandalungwa and Lemba, two municipalities in Kinshasa, are currently engaged in a dispute over the ownership of the title of "Paris" and *ville lumière*, even though (or precisely because) both are heavily hit by constant power cuts and remain in the dark during many days on end.The mayor of Lemba even painted the slogan "Lemba is Paris" above the entrance of the municipality's administrative headquarters. Similarly, on Facebook, several pages are called "Lemba c'est Paris" or "Bandal c'est Paris." Mimesis in the postcolonial context deserves more attention than we can offer here, but for some interesting reflections on the qualities of the mimetic in relation to modernity (in the context of Abidjan) see: Sasha Newell, The Modernity Bluff: Crime, consumption, and citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012; and on Kinshasa, De Boeck and Plissart, Kinshasa, pp. 20ff.

The mayor of Lemba even painted the close save

The same continuing fascination with modernity's propositions mark the work of Kinshasa-based artists such as Kingelez Bodys Isek or Bylex. Both are known for the utopian urban visions that transpire in their work, and especially in pieces such as Kingelez's *Ville fantôme* ("the Phantom

City") or Bylex's *Cité Touristique* ("Tourist City").For Kingelez, see De Boeck and Plissart, Kinshasa, pp. 250–1; for Bylex, see: Koen Van Synghel and Filip De Boeck, "Bylex's Tourist City: A reflection on utopia in the post-political city," in Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone (eds), Rogue Urbanism. Emergent African cities. Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2013, with De Boeck and Baloji, Suturing the City.

For Kingelez, see De Boeck and close save

Whereas the models that gave form to the colonial urban plans of the 1950s are slowly decaying (as are the neighborhoods they spawned), the maquettes or models offered by these two artists revive and rework many of the modernist-urbanist propositions, albeit with a specific twist. Both artists approach a similar subject in different ways; the emancipatory and humanitarian preoccupations of colonial modernity, its religious overtones, moralizing framework, its authoritarian and totalitarian nature, and its obsession with security issues and control, and both return incessantly to it in their artistic oeuvre and in the form and content of the ideal city that they propose. What is striking in their propositions, is the fact that the ideal city is not viewed as an entity to inhabit on a permanent basis, but as a place to counterbalance existing cities, a place to visit and revive oneself. For Bylex the ideal city is, in a way, a resort, but whereas a real resort such as South Africa's Sun City brands itself as a "kingdom of pleasure,"In Kinshasa, the idea of a resort-like "kingdom of pleasure" materialized vividly in the Chinese Palace of former DRC President Mobutu Sese Sako (1965–97). The palace, built in the compound of the presidential site of Nsele, north of Kinshasa's national airport, on the bank of Congo River, today is an abandoned ruin.

In Kinshasa, the idea of a resort- close save

Bylex's Tourist City is a reflexive sort of resort that trains the muscles of the mind. The main protagonist is still the tourist in Bylex's work, as she or he is central to the Sun City concept, but now the tourist is not a pleasure-seeker, but the seeker of inner growth. According to Bylex this inner wisdom can be acquired in the city's central building, the Royal Dome. Part temple and part museum, the Dome is a place of contemplation and reflection. It is here that all the knowledge of the world is stored and made accessible. After visiting the Dome, the tourist inevitably has to return to the imperfections of the reality of the city that she or he calls home. Replenished with new inspiration and creativity, powered by renewed reflexive capacity and imagination, the tourist is now ready to counter the urban dystopia on the ground and bring existence in the city back into balance, in order to make the city a better place for everyone.

Bylex's utopian alternative for Kinshasa strongly resonates with the doctor's vision for the Tower (and in fact, the Tower forms the logical material realization of this artistic card-and-colored-paper dream). Similarly, the Tower is in tune with the various urban development projects currently underway in Kinshasa, the satellite cities and gated communities, where the *Cité du Fleuve* is the most widely known and most prominent example.See Filip De Boeck, "Inhabiting Ocular Ground: Kinshasa's future in the light of Congo's spectral urban politics," Cultural Anthropology 26, no. 2 (2011): pp. 263–86.

See Filip De Boeck, "Inhabiting close save

Cité du Fleuve is the name given to an exclusive development situated on two artificially created islands on land reclaimed from the sandbanks and swamp of the Congo River. City of the River, River City, a name that echoes many of the ideas behind concepts such as Stanford economist Paul Romer's "charter city"; that is, a special urban reform zone which allows governments of developing countries to adopt new systems of rules and establish cities that can drive economic progress in the rest of the country. The *Cité du Fleuve* also replicates the segregationist city model that proved so effective during Belgian colonial rule.

Surprisingly perhaps, construction of the *Cité du Fleuve* and similar real estate developments do not seem to have triggered much conflict or criticism in Kinshasa, not even from those chased from their homes or fields to make way for the developments. Clearly, for better or for worse, and in spite of former failures, the idea of a "revolution of modernity" (the slogan by means of which the central government currently brands its efforts to rebuild the city and the country) has not lost its appeal. In combination with an aesthetic that links former colonial modernist models to the shiny look of Dubai and other new urban hotspots in the Global South, the possibility of a *tabula rasa*, of starting anew and building a better, cleaner, and more orderly city, appears to be simply irresistible in an urban world where holes have become the main infrastructural units. The modernist urban planning ideals are in a sense like Bylex's Dome or the doctor's Tower. Their maquettes do not make for real places in real urban futures, but they do allow one to break away, at least mentally if not physically, from the city's real condition of ongoing decline, and from the worries and ruminations that its ruination constantly generates.

Text: Filip De Boeck / Photos: Sammy Baloji

Notes on a video-installation by
Sammy Baloji and Filip De Boeck (2015)

The video-installation Tower and the photographs by Sammy Baloji are the result of two research trips that photographer Sammy Baloji and anthropologist Filip De Boeck made together to Kinshasa in March 2013 and March 2015. See Filip De Boeck and Sammy Baloji, Suturing the City: Living together in Congo's urban worlds. London: Autograph ABP, 2016.

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